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North, South Korea Set Direct Talks

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SEOUL, Aug. 10—North Korea and South Korea today appeared headed toward their first direct talks in more than two years, but the development generated scant hope for improved relations or for North Korean participation in next month's Olympic Games.

South Korean leaders indicated today that they will accept the latest proposal from North Korea for a small, preliminary meeting at the Demilitarized Zone next week. The two Koreas, hostile neighbors since their civil war ended in a standoff in 1953, have been exchanging proposals for such a meeting for more than a month.

The planned Aug. 19 session would include five parliamentary officials from each side and is intended to set an agenda for a larger meeting later this month. That meeting would take place either here or in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. The two nations still disagree about the size, membership and agenda for the later meeting, however.

"Anytime the North and South get together and meet, since it happens so rarely, it's encouraging," a western diplomat here said. "Yet the distance is so wide, it's hard to predict much progress."

"There have been preliminary meetings before, but not much has come of them," agreed Kim Young Jak, a political science professor at Kookmin University. "We are naturally very cautious about North Korea's intentions."

North Korea broke off the last direct talks in January 1986, citing an annual U.S.-South Korean military exercise as provocation. Since then, the two nations have communicated indirectly through the International Olympic Committee in a failed effort to negotiate North Korea's demand to cohost the Olympics, set to begin here Sept. 17.

North Korea now says it will join Cuba, Vietnam and three other communist allies in boycotting the Games. But Pyongyang's most important allies, China and the Soviet Union, are sending athletes to Seoul and, according to U.S. officials, are urging North Korea not to disrupt the Games.

The North's boycott has prompted fears here and in Washington that Pyongyang may seek to sabotage the Games through terrorism. Those fears have led the U.S. to promise an increased air and naval presence in the region during the Games.

The prospect of direct negotiations between the two sides, even if they achieve little, has raised Seoul's hopes that tensions may be eased for the Games. If the talks are at least polite, one diplomat said, "it could help the world see that the Korean peninsula is not going to blow up and that would be good for the Olympics."

South Korean officials also hope the talks will defuse the efforts of leftist students who have been demonstrating for unification.

Analysts here said North Korea is unlikely to change its mind about the boycott, and Olympic officials have said that it is too late to arrange for any events to be staged in North Korea.

An Asian diplomat said that North Korea, with its closed and ideologically rigid society, would not risk allowing its athletes to see the prosperity and relative freedom of South Korea.

"You can't have 300 youngsters walking around Pyongyang talking about what they've seen in Seoul," the diplomat said.

Washington Post special correspondent Peter Maass contributed to this report.